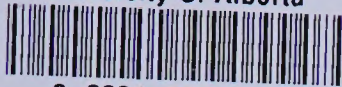


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ASIAN STUDIES INQUIRY PROGRAM

Class and Caste in Village India



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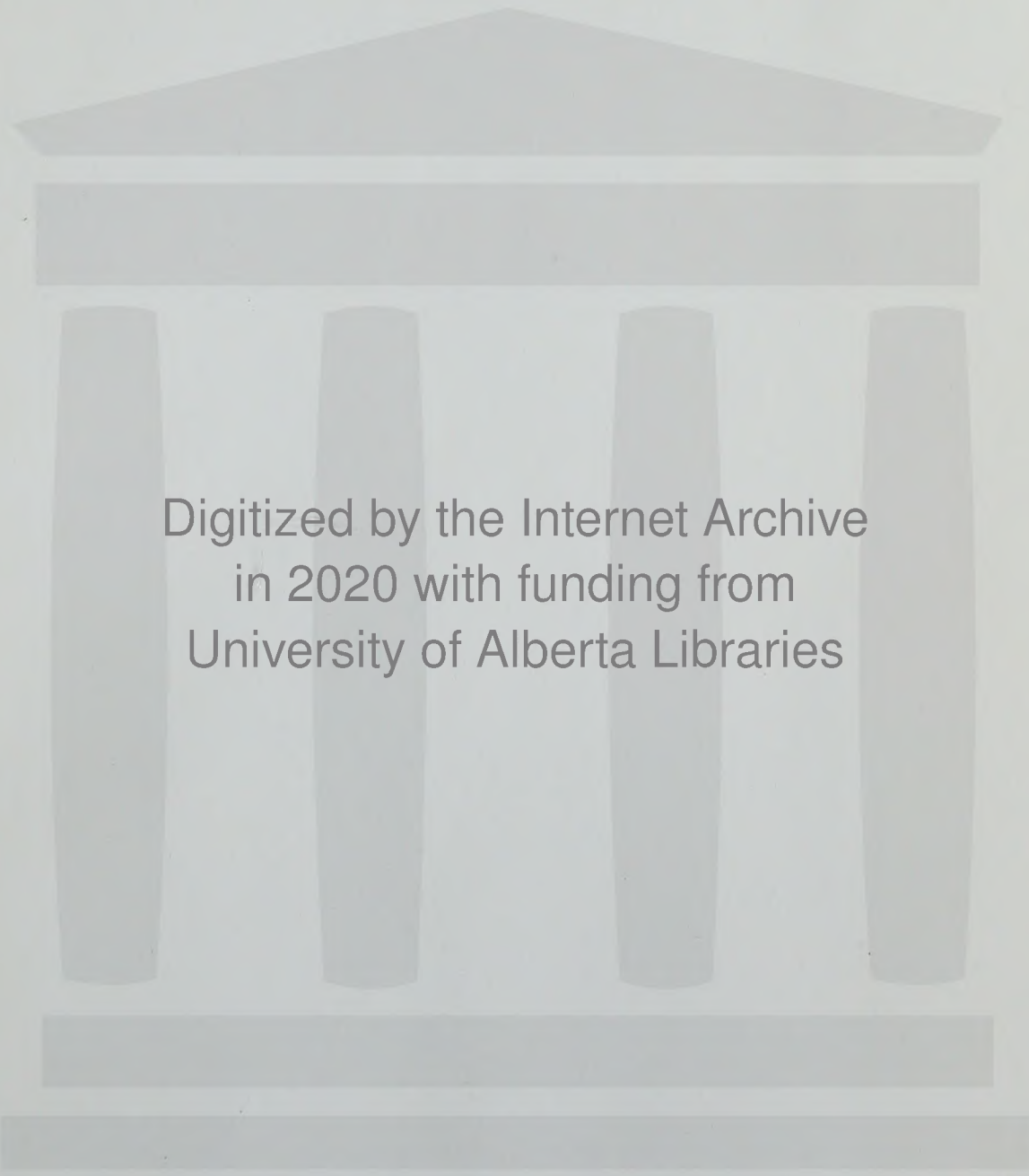
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ASIAN STUDIES INQUIRY PROGRAM

Class and Caste in Village India

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Introduction

In 2000 B.C., a pastoral people called Aryans, left their homeland north of the Caspian Sea and migrated to India. Advanced in the art of war, the Aryans were able to conquer and subjugate the Dravidians of the Indus and Gangetic valleys. Our knowledge of the Aryans in India comes from a collection of hymns, chants, and incantations compiled into four sacred books in 800 B.C., and known as the *Vedas*. The first and most important of these sacred writings is the *Rig-Veda*, which sheds considerable light on the Aryan institutions and the institutional changes that occurred during the Vedic period (1500–600 B.C.). Sociologically, this period is also identified as the Aryan-Dravidian Synthesis, when cultural elements of the Dravidian society were assimilated into the institutions of the Aryans.

One of the most significant results of this synthesis was the formation of a class system based on *varna* (skin color). The *Rig-Veda* indicates that the Aryan people, while nomads, were divided into two major classes based on occupation. They were the warrior-nobility and the common tribesmen. Once the fair-skinned Aryans settled in India as rulers over the dark-skinned Dravidians, whom they referred to as *Dasas* (slaves), the class system was re-organized to preserve the racial “purity” of the Aryans. With the emergence of Brahmanism and the religious synthesis of Aryan and Dravidian supernatural beliefs, justification for the new classes was provided.

“... When they divided Man (purusha), into how many parts did they divide Him? What was his mouth, what were his arms, what were his thighs and feet called?

The brahman was his mouth, of his arms were made the kshatriya, his thighs became the vaisya, of his feet the sudra were born. . . .”

Using *varna* as the criterion, the Aryan rulers placed the conquered Dasas and those Aryans who had intermarried with the Dravidians on the lower social levels. Some degree of social mobility, especially between the Brahman and Kshatriya classes, was permissible for a time. However, with the collapse of the Gupta dynasty (A.D. 500?), class mobility was frowned upon by social customs, though exceptions continued to exist in various parts of India.

Each of the four classes was assigned specific duties to perform in accordance with ancient scriptures such as the Code of Manu (which was compiled in the third century B.C.). The Brahmins (priests) were obliged to study and teach, receive and give donations and perform sacrifices. The Kshatriyas (warriors) were to rule the people and provide society with protection. The Vaisyas (merchants and landlords) were to carry on trade and breed cattle. The Sudras (menial workers), as the lowest of the four classes, were to perform services for the other social groups.

When the Portuguese arrived in the 1500's, they observed that Indian society was divided into numerous groups, which they called *castas* (families or clans) and

the name took hold. The Indians have always made a distinction between *varna* (class) and *jati* (birth and station). Since the Vedic period, there have only been the four classes. However, since that period, it is surmised that within these four classes thousands of castes have appeared and disappeared. Since caste is identified with occupation, it is assumed that the growth of these groups is the result of the increasing complexity of Indian society. When a social need developed, a new caste appeared. Likewise, when a service was no longer required, the particular caste disappeared. However, while a caste might change its function to meet the needs of society, it could never perform a duty outside the pale of its class status.

The common bond among all the castes of India is Hinduism. The Vedic period had produced a synthesis of Aryan and Dravidian religious beliefs called Brahmanism. In the sixth century B.C., Buddhism and Jainism emerged to challenge the influence of Brahmanism. Introducing such notions as tolerance for another's point of view, nonviolence to all living forms, and the possibility of salvation from reincarnation regardless of class status, these religions picked up many followers. Buddhism, especially, found favor among the wealthy Vaisyas. By the second century A.D., Buddhism was finding favor among elements of the lower classes and castes as well. The assimilation of the appealing elements of Buddhism and Jainism into their traditional religion produced a new re-

ligious and social system, which Westerners refer to as Hinduism. All of India's castes and classes are dictated to by Hinduism. The conduct of each member is regulated by *dharma* (set of duties), and the danger of "pollution" (ritual "impurity") governs intercaste relationships. Down to the 1900's, Hindu thought was reflected socially through the behavior of caste members. Religious beliefs explained to each Hindu the reason for his caste status.

During the late 1800's and into the present age, many Indians were taught Western ideas. Introduced to such democratic ideas as social equality, worth of the individual, and equal justice for all, many Indians believed that Indian social values had to be altered. This was especially true of the concept of "untouchability." Having committed themselves to the creation of a democratic society, Indian leaders decided to remove the discriminatory aspects associated with caste. Such a leader was Gandhi.

In 1947, with the promulgation of the Indian Constitution, the Indian government decreed that: "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them. . . ." In addition, the condition of untouchability was made illegal.

The readings in this unit explore the possible origin, development, nature, and function of the caste system in traditional India and the effect of caste attitudes on the Indian government's attempt to modernize and industrialize India.



Sons of Brahmins, who for centuries considered it dignified to walk and move slowly, are taught to leave the school ground within three minutes after their dismissal.

The Caste System

Since the birth of civilizations, societies have found it advantageous to have various groups assigned to specific labors in order to fulfill their social, political, and economic needs. These groups have been referred to as classes. Many societies have practiced social mobility; however, in traditional India, social classes were fixed and an individual was destined to remain in the class of his parents.

In ancient India, the Aryan rulers assigned specific duties to each of the four classes. It was believed by the ruling Aryans that the social rigidity and assignment of duties would ensure a society of social stability and fulfillment of basic needs.

Westerners tend to think of Indian social stratification in terms of four major classes, yet Indian society is far more complex. In the following reading, you will discover the distinction between *varna* (class or caste) and *jati* (subclass or subcaste).

Origins of Caste[†]

Most societies have classes, but in few societies is the transition by an individual from one class to another so difficult as in India, and in none are there such pronounced and widely accepted restrictions on social relations between the various social groups.

Hindus often speak of their society as containing just the four castes referred to in the early Sanskrit writings: the Brahmins (priests and teachers), the Kshatriyas

(rulers and warriors), the Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and the Shudras (workers and peasants). Outside this fourfold social order was a despised fifth group of still lower persons, often called “outcastes” or “untouchables.”

The Western stereotype of the Hindu caste system quite naturally is based on this classic Indian description. The actual picture, however, is far more complex. Today a fourfold division exists only in theory. In the words of one prominent Indian publicist, “The fourfold caste is

[†] Beatrice P. Lamb, *India: World in Transition* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1963).

merely a theoretical division of society . . . it is a sociological fiction.” The effective units in Indian society today are some 3,000 separate castes and subcastes, the members of which do not normally intermarry or eat together except in the most Westernized circles.

In the English language, the word “caste”—derived from the Portuguese—is commonly used to refer both to the four original groups and to the far more numerous groups of modern times. From the Sanskrit, however, Indians have two different words for the two distinct kinds of groupings: Varna refers to the original fourfold division, jati to today’s more numerous groups. It may help to avoid confusion if one bears in mind this Indian distinction. The word “jati” used to be translated as subcaste. But since the jati is the effective social unit, the group within which all marriages normally take place, many sociologists today translate it as caste.

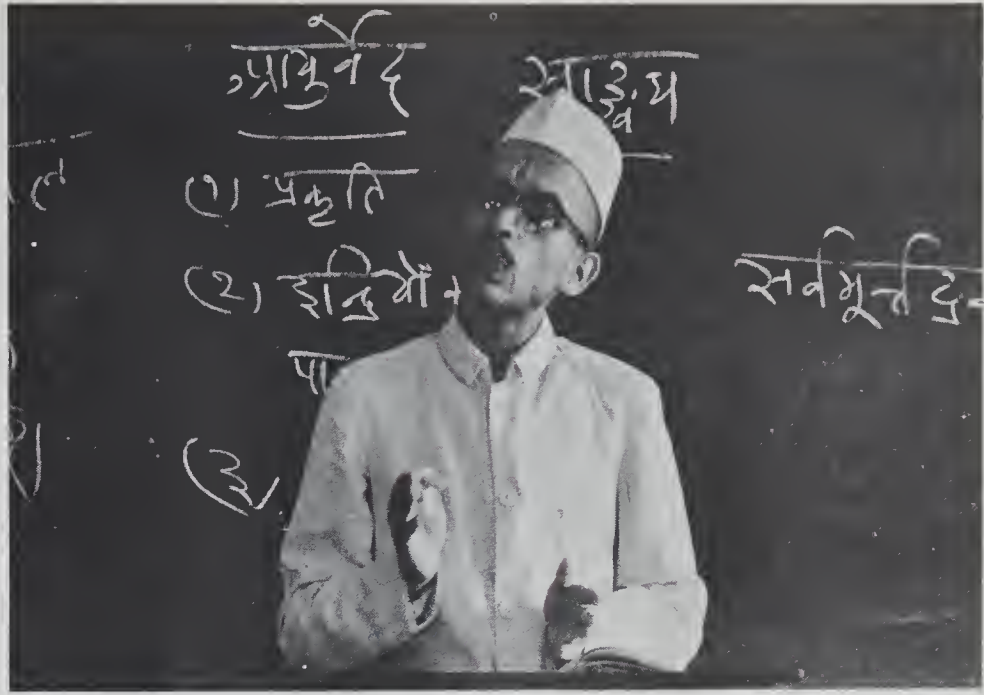
All four groups mentioned in the *Rig Veda* were regarded as of divine origin, each having emerged from a portion of the Creator symbolically appropriate to its activities. The Brahmins were thought to have come from the mouth of God, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet. At the outset, the relationship between the four groups seems to have been somewhat fluid, although the Brahmin was strongly entrenched at the top of the hierarchy. There was no prohibition of eating together, and intermarriage, though not favored, was not completely prohibited.

Some Indians hold that this fourfold grouping originated merely with a broad division of labor. Others, however, tend to relate it also, at least in part, to racial

distinctions. The early Vedas record the repugnance the Aryan invaders felt for the dark-skinned, snub-nosed natives whom they found in India. It is generally believed that they relegated these Dravidians to the laboring class, while the still earlier settlers or aborigines on whom the Dravidians in turn looked down, became the outcastes.

At an early date, the varna system became explicitly connected with religion. Each group had its own special duty (dharma), and it became important to do the duty appropriate to one’s own group rather than that of another group. If a man lived a good life, he would be born into a higher order in the next incarnation. If a woman lived a good life, she might someday be reborn as a man. An immoral life led to rebirth as an animal or other subhuman creature. The Code of Manu, dating in its present form from about 200 B.C., systematized the fourfold division and laid down duties for the members of each order.

Did the more numerous groups, the jatis, develop by a subdivision of the varnas? Or did the jati system have a completely different origin? The traditional Hindu explanation of the many separate castes of today is that the offspring of mixed marriages came to be treated as new groups. As the number of new groups increased, the possible kinds of mixed marriages increased, each producing a new caste. Modern scholars have been skeptical of this explanation. Some hold that the jati system arose out of the organization of society into hereditary monopolistic guilds. Others argue that a sufficient explanation is the almost continuous arrival over the centuries of new tribes.



Most teachers in India belong to the Brahman caste, the highest caste.

The Four Major Groups†

The Brāhmaṇs

By definition, to ‘possess the *brahman*,’ that is to say, the sacred power deriving from the ritual formula (*brahman*) was the prerogative of the brāhmaṇs, priests who had studied the Veda, the source of all knowledge. . . . Consequently, they were qualified to teach the Veda, to make gifts and to receive them. Briefly, they were destined to lead a religious, intellectual and saintly life, surrounded by respect, full of the dignity of a pure ancestry, and theoretically absolved from the necessity of gaining a living. There was no question of their having to remain celibate—on the contrary. . . .

It is important to understand that in

ancient India donation was an immemorial institution which ensured for the donor a definite reward both in this life and in subsequent lives; it was considered not only an obligation but also the supreme way of acquitting the debt which every human being contracted with the gods by the very reason of his birth. It goes without saying that the brāhmaṇs were never slow in pointing out the virtue of making gifts. But, prudently, the law usually laid down that it was not permissible for a donor to disinherit his family totally for the benefit of the brāhmaṇs. Even so, . . . the brāhmaṇs acquired possession of vast estates and received their revenues; they were entitled to have these lands cultivated by slaves and serfs. They also became the recipients of public and private buildings, even of entire villages. On top of all this,

†Jeannine Auboyer, *Daily Life in Ancient India* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965).

they were exempt from taxes since they were deemed to have discharged such debts through 'acts of piety.'

Being sacrosanct, the brāhmaṇs might neither be sentenced to death, nor to any kind of torture or corporal punishment. The heaviest penalty which could be applied to one was the cutting off of his coil of hair, an act which was by no means a cruel joke but, rather, a symbolic gesture of profound significance. This coil of hair, which they wore knotted on the top or at the side of their head, was the visible sign of their brāhmaṇic initiation and they preserved it intact throughout their life from the moment when they had undergone, at the age of three, the ritual tonsure. The removal of this topknot was thus equivalent to proclaiming their exclusion from the brāhmaṇic caste, and the penalty entailed dreadful consequences, since this excommunication condemned the victim to the life of an outlaw: torn for ever from his surroundings, expelled from every community, rejected by all castes, he had no alternative but to leave the country. It was a social as much as a moral death. On the other hand, any harm or annoyance caused to a brāhmaṇ was punished with great severity.

Many brāhmaṇs were worthy of the respect with which they were surrounded; they led a simple and pious existence, disdaining material profits and fulfilling the duties of their caste with piety. They acted as village schoolmasters, or taught in the universities. Sometimes they withdrew to a forest-bound hermitage, where they would live in humble bamboo huts and devote themselves to their religious duties, to meditation and teaching, enjoying in all simplicity the charms and austerities of a

frugal but poetic existence, surrounded by the wild animals which their gentleness had tamed. But, by the side of these brāhmaṇs who fulfilled their caste obligations quietly and obscurely, with a genuine purity of heart, literary sources depict an altogether different type of brāhmaṇ, who was far less respectable. These made blatant use of the knowledge of magic acquired through a study of certain Vedic or brāhmaṇic texts, and did not hesitate to exploit the credulity and superstitious spirit of the masses, and earned their living by telling fortunes or practising sorcery. These were real charlatans, thriving most often in country districts, and though they were despised more or less openly, there is reason to think that they were feared as well.

Between these two extremes were to be found a great variety of brāhmaṇs exercising trades or professions unconnected with their priestly character; these might be actors, owners of gaming houses, quacks, tax collectors, army commanders, managers of transportation concerns, spies, or even hired servants. There even exist references to brāhmaṇs who were labourers or butchers, although both these activities were disapproved by brāhmaṇic orthodoxy, involving as they did the destruction of life of animals or insects. It is also possible that such individuals engaged in occupations incompatible with the purity of the brāhmaṇic caste because they lived in a society of mainly Buddhist persuasion and were forced to earn their living without hoping to receive the traditional donations. In this they would have been authorized by the law that each caste was able to apply in case of 'distress,' a law that permitted individuals to practise professions normally disapproved of. . . .



On National Army Day, soldiers parade camelback.

The Warrior-Nobles

This caste was, perhaps, originally limited to the king himself, his family, his suite and his vassals, but during the period with which we are concerned the name *kṣatriya* was applied to a far wider circle and was no longer reserved strictly for those who carried arms and were the professional warriors. But this essentially military character still persisted in the education given to them since, besides a knowledge of the Veda, they were taught the use of weapons and their hereditary aptitude for command was cultivated. Their whole upbringing was designed to fit them for such elevated posts as that of governor, general, administrator or high civil servant. . . .

The *kṣatriya* caste was considered pre-eminent, especially in Buddhist circles; it was, in fact, in rivalry with the brāhmaṇic

caste, but its members generally recognized superiority of the brāhmaṇs because of their priestly character.

Although the king's suite was, quite naturally, recruited from among the *kṣatriyas*, and the army was largely composed of members of this caste, many of these nobles did not exercise a military calling and were authorized to gain their living in various other ways. . . . These latter still retained the privileges attaching to their caste, the most typical of which were, perhaps, the two forms of marriage which were their special prerogative: the form which consisted in carrying off the bride—a remote survival of the forcible seizure of women during military campaigns; and that in which the union was concluded with whoever proved the victor of a competition in which the chief element was an archery contest.



A merchant smokes his water pipe while waiting for customers to buy his jasmine.

The Vaiśyas

Although the *vaiśyas* shared the right of the *brāhmaṇs* and *kṣatriyas* to be taught the Veda and were, consequently, integrated into the system of *dharma*, they were still considered definitely inferior. Originally they had formed the agricultural community, and it was no doubt this humble character which singled them out for the drudgery of such tasks as tallage and statute labour. By the beginning of the classical era their lot had improved greatly. From being small farmers many of them had become powerful landlords, while others followed occupations that were both lucrative and honourable, often as experts in precious stones and metals, woven materials, spices or perfumes, whose knowledge was held in high esteem by the *kṣatriyas* themselves. . . .

Several members of the *vaiśya* caste were, at one time or another, appointed to

important posts, and it was by no means rare for a king to choose his counsellor from among them. But something of their origin still remained: just as in previous centuries it had fallen to them to perform the statutory labour, now they had to pay heavier taxes and duties than any other class. So in this way they were fulfilling their original function, that of working and earning money to maintain the priestly caste, which was exempted from working on the land (deemed impure), and the warrior caste, which was preoccupied with territorial conquest. Thus forced to support part of the population as well as their own families, their aptitudes developed and enabled them to achieve fortune and respect. It was thanks to them that the State's treasury was able to make up for the inroads on its funds caused by donations to the *brāhmaṇs* and the expenses of State administration and royal and religious ceremonies.



A member of the lowest caste, this servant cleans bathrooms in an apartment building.

The Servile Class

Born, or rather 'reborn,' to serve the three other classes, the *śūdras* were burdened by a very marked social and religious inferiority. Their caste, in Vedic times, seems to have included the dark-skinned aborigines conquered by the *Āryans*, to whom were added later some of the poorer *Āryans* themselves and certain other people who had forfeited their rights for one reason or another. They were therefore not only despised from the earliest times, but also considered impure. They nevertheless took part in the *dharma*; but their benefits therefrom were limited to seeking redress under the law, and, under certain conditions, the opportunity to study the sacred texts of Hinduism, . . . [and] to take part in private but not public rites. This was the limit of their rights.

Their duties far outweighed these

rights, for they had no possibility of freeing themselves from the servitude which was theirs by reason of birth. This is where the theory of *karma*¹ assumed its full significance: since being born into a particular caste was considered the fruit of acts accomplished in previous existences, it was quite clear that the *śūdras* had to their debit a heavy load of evil deeds from their past lives. Since this debt ruled the condition of the individual throughout his present life, and could only be modified at the next rebirth, the clear implication was that there was no hope of their improving this situation during their lifetime. . . . This idea was responsible for an understandable feeling of inferiority on the part of this underprivileged caste, more especially as the whole concept was carefully maintained by the ruling classes, and showed itself in the behavior of everyone throughout India. . . .

1. Transmigration of the soul.

Many of them worked for wealthy tradesmen and landlords, were paid a regular wage, fed, lodged (sometimes on the employer's premises, sometimes outside) and received further benefits in kind; agricultural workers, for example, were paid a fifth of their wages in goods and produce if they were fed and lodged, or a third if not. They remained attached to the same family, from father to son. Their low status compelled them to eat only the remnants from the master's table, to wear his cast-off clothing and to make use only of discarded objects. The employer was supposed to treat them decently, and they were in fact protected, to some extent, by the law; he was obliged to make a contract with them, a document enumerating the two parties' respective rights and duties, and setting down the names of all the employee's dependents. While the *śūdra* was expected to give proof of zeal and professional competence, his master was in his turn obliged to furnish him with the instruments necessary for his work and to replace those which were worn out or defective. The contract laid down the number of hours to be worked and the wages to be paid, and specified the goods and produce which would normally be provided over and above the wages. If the wages were not paid or if the contract was unjustifiably terminated, the employer was liable to prosecution.

The *śūdras* were subjected to what seems a relatively light taxation. On the other hand, they were subject throughout the year to perform forced labour for the State consisting of one or two days' work a month. Those particularly affected by this law were the workers who processed rice, flour, oil or sugar, and those who

worked in spinning or weaving mills, and in factories making arms and military supplies. This forced labour could sometimes be avoided by paying a sum of money.

But the servile class was not homogeneous since, even here, distinctions were made between the 'pure' or 'unexcluded' and the 'excluded.' The latter were practically identical with the 'outcastes' ('untouchables').

The 'Outcastes'

... They comprised a series of subcastes among which that of the *caṇḍālas* is the one most frequently mentioned. The outcastes all had trades or crafts which were despised, or even condemned, by religious orthodoxy, either because their work involved the taking of human or animal life, or because their functions involved some ritual defilement. Included in these two categories were hunters, fishermen, butchers, curriers, executioners, gravediggers, undertakers, those who sold liquor, sweepers, and, during certain historical periods, basket-makers and wheelwrights.

Among all these, the situation of the *caṇḍālas* was the worst; in later ages they were given the name of 'untouchables' because of their impurity. They lived in isolated villages or in quarters outside the town limits, and spoke a debased tongue which was almost a dialect. They were supposed to dress in clothes stripped from corpses (for they often acted as public executioners or undertakers); they were permitted to eat only from cracked bowls and dishes, and iron was the only metal they might use for ornaments and jewelry. A brāhmaṇ who killed one of them incurred the same penalty as for killing a dog.

Regarded by society as the vilest dregs of the human species, they had to be most careful to avoid polluting members of the castes by any kind of contact or even coming within their sight. For this reason, they never moved outside their villages or quarters without striking a pair of clappers together to warn people of their approach. When a man of caste chanced to glance at one of them, he was bound to carry out rites of purification. When he learnt that he had beheld a *caṇḍāla*, even unconsciously, his first action was to turn away as quickly as possible; then he would bathe his eyes with perfumed water so as to avert ill fortune; he had then to abstain from food and drink for the rest of the day. His fear of defilement was so great that he dreaded the idea even that the breeze which touched him might pre-

viously have passed over a *caṇḍāla*'s body, or again, that the shadow of one of these unfortunates might have come between his own person and the sun. As far as the *caṇḍāla* was concerned, he was held responsible for having provoked such a defilement of a man of caste, even if the offending action had been quite involuntary. In fact, he was well advised to make every effort to avoid such incidents, since the wrathful men of caste would certainly have him beaten unconscious. Even worse, he could be quite sure that, as a result, he would be reborn in the body of an animal, and so the moment when he would be freed from the transmigration of the soul . . . would be put back even further. It went without saying that a man of caste might not share a *caṇḍāla*'s food, even if he were dying of hunger. . . .

Only untouchables may handle hides from sacred cows.



The Structure of Caste

As Indian society became more complex, there developed a need for special services. Within each of the classes, subgroups appeared and associated themselves with a specialized occupation. These subgroups became known as castes. The needs of society did not remain static, and in time, the castes became divided into subcastes and offered even more specialized services.

Because Hindu society is thus split into groups, and because it is rural, living in villages each of which is very much a separate unit, it has been a very unchanging society, one much governed by custom and the religious form of custom ritual. Moreover, since the subcaste is the basic unit, custom and ritual vary from subcaste to subcaste. Between subcastes of the same caste in the same region the variation may be small. Between subcastes of different castes or different regions the variation may be large. But there is always some variation. Thus McKim Marriott reports that in the village of Kishan Garhi, where the Butchers claim Rajput descent and call themselves after famous Rajput clans, the Sweepers will not work for them because in one village 40 miles away the Butchers make winnowing fans for other castes, and in Kishan Garhi winnowing fans are made by the Sweepers.

Yet the Sweepers know that in other villages round about the Butchers are accepted by the Sweepers of those villages as ranking above them in matters of water and food, and they would doubtless have so accepted them in Kishan Garhi if the sister of one of them had not married into the village where the Butchers make winnowing fans, so that they had found out about it. Diet may differ, marriage and funeral customs may differ, the particular Gods chosen for home worship or the time of worship for general gods may differ. The whole feel and atmosphere of life in one caste is different from that of another; the Brahmin abhors meat and alcohol and violence; the Rajput glories in all three. Even between closely related subcastes, one gets this sense of difference. I remember a Deshastha Brahmin girl graduate, who had married a Chitpavan Brahmin graduate, explaining to me how revolu-

[†]Taya Zinkin, *Caste Today* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

tionary a step she had taken for love; how strange she had felt at first in her mother-in-law's house. She and her mother-in-law were both of Maharashtrian Brahmin sub-castes and from the same town; yet, somehow, all their traditions of running a house were different; they even prepared the same vegetables in different ways.

The structure is not quite as rigid as it looks. That the Brahmin is at the top and the Sweeper near the bottom everybody is agreed. In between there can be arguments. A caste can try to go up in the world by changing its custom, trying to imitate the Joneses of caste, or by changing

its name and hoping that its origins will be forgotten, or it may claim to be Kshatriya. Many such attempts of course fail; but when a caste is important in a region, or when it increases its education and political power, they may well succeed. The Kayasths of Northern India have now established themselves among the top castes in Bengal, despite the occasional snigger about a Patna High Court decision establishing them as Sudras, but in the U.P.¹ they are still Sudras. And if the Mahrattas wish to call themselves Kshatriyas, few in Maharashtra will say them nay.

1. Uttar Pradesh is an Indian state.



Despite being equal before the law, untouchables continue to hold jobs traditionally restricted to their caste.

This limited mobility is made easier by the fact that, although the ranking is fixed in any one village, it has never, for the middle castes especially, been nationwide. Ranking may even differ subtly as between villages in the same district. And between regions there may be great fluidity if only because so many of the middle castes do not extend beyond their own language area.

Untouchability, though the phenomenon by which caste is best known outside India, differs in degree rather than in kind from other caste restrictions. Throughout the caste structure, there are certain relations one does not have with one's inferiors, like not taking water or certain foods from them; there are some relations, like marriage, which one does not have with anybody except a member of one's subcaste, and even within one's subcaste, one may not be able to marry within a particular section—a member of one's own gotra (gotra includes all those descended from the same ancestor) with Brahmins, or of one's own clan amongst Rajputs. For the Untouchables these restrictions are extended. Not only does one not take water from them, they may not even take water from the same well. Not only does one not take food from them, they may not eat in the same restaurant. Not only does one not marry them, they may not even enter the temple or the house or stroll on the main village streets. Even their cattle may often not drink from the same pool as a Brahmin's.

Moreover the Untouchables themselves are not all the same. One Untouchable caste may well apply to the Untouchable caste below it much the same restrictions that are applied to it by the

Touchable castes above. I was mobbed by Chamars when I persuaded a Dom to draw water from their well—my first contact with Untouchability within Untouchability: a Mang may not draw water from a Mahar well and all over India Chamars will have nothing to do with Sweepers.

Caste is a way of life which divides society into small groups, each of which lives in a rather different way from the rest. Because of these differences, because the groups are so tiny, and because the most important relations of life, above all marriage, take place within them, the groups have great power over their members, and thus great power of survival. To break caste is to cut oneself off from one's group, which means from one's family, from one's friends, and from all those who live exactly as one does oneself, and one cuts oneself off without any hope of being adopted by another group—one is ostracised by everybody in one's own group and will not even be accepted by a lower group. Thus the ostracised Brahmin cannot become a warrior or even an Untouchable since one has to be *born* within one's caste; only if he finds others from his own caste who also have been ostracised can he once more belong to a group because in a sect a new subcaste has been created.

Through this great complex of rules, holding it together and giving it meaning, runs the idea of pollution. One does not do that which pollutes. It is the fear of pollution which provides both the sanction for much of what one does and does not do in one's daily life. Still more it is this fear which limits one's contacts outside one's caste.

Pollution

Whenever an individual becomes a member of a particular group, his behavior is regulated by the rules established by the organization. Violation of caste *dharma* (rules and regulations) results in *karma*, the moral consequence that predetermines one's status in his next earthly existence. India's caste dharmas, like codes of conduct in many cultures, emphasized what an individual should not do, rather than what he might do. Within each caste, the individual is regulated in his conduct and duties by the danger of violating the ritual taboos of his group. To commit, or be the victim of any act against caste ritual taboos is to become "polluted," or ritually impure. The very fact that one individual could do something that could pollute another (such as an "untouchable" casting his shadow on a person of Brahman status) resulted in very rigid codes of conduct.

Caste reveals itself most obviously and most rigidly in everyday life, through the concept of pollution, a concept fundamental to the Hindu way of life and which needs explaining at some length, for it has nothing to do with cleanliness or indeed with sin and is purely ritual.

The pocket edition of the *Oxford Dictionary* defines 'to pollute' as 'to destroy the purity or outrage the sanctity of.' Let us take a concrete example. The water of the Ganges, to the outsider, appears dirty; not only are the half-charred bodies of

those who were cremated along its sacred banks thrown into it, but so also are the entire corpses of those who have died of infectious diseases like smallpox. Yet, because the Ganges is the holy river of the Hindus, its water is considered crystal pure; not only is it used like Jordan water for ritual but it is swallowed like Vichy water for medical purposes as well. By contrast, boiled water from a tube well, sealed in a sterilised bottle, carried by a spotlessly clean Untouchable, is so impure that its contact, let alone its absorption, is polluting.

[†]Taya Zinkin, *Caste Today* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

Judaism and Islam both consider the pig an impure animal and forbid eating its flesh; Hinduism too has a long list of dietary taboos but there is a basic difference. Pork is not polluting to the Jew or the Muslim; it is forbidden. Eating pork is committing sin, breaking the divine will as revealed by God himself. There is no equivalent to sin in Hinduism, which has no revealed divine laws, only a tradition and a philosophic discourse. Whenever I try to explain how Hinduism is different from all other religions I quote the two cases which, to my mind, illuminate the nature of Hinduism in relation to Judaism, which comes nearest to it as the only other original all-embracing ritualistic faith. The first Israeli Ambassador to Britain was very orthodox; when he had to dine at Buckingham Palace he ate only hard-boiled eggs, oranges and bananas which he peeled himself because he could not eat anything which might have come into contact either with pork or with plates which might at some time have contained pork or other forbidden foods. By contrast, when a certain young high-caste Brahmin went to study in England, his mother, a very devout woman most of whose day is spent in devotional activities, told him to eat beef although the family did not even allow eggs into the house; she thought that in cold, damp England, meat was necessary: 'When you come back I will have you ritually depolluted,' she said, obviously not perturbed at the thought of her son eating cow's meat; yet she herself worships cows as divine.

Hinduism is like that; everyone can do what he likes; nothing on earth will stop his being a Hindu; nobody, no procedure exists by which one can cease to be a Hindu.

However one can be and is thrown out of one's caste and subcaste if one's behaviour flaunts custom, for custom has assumed the strength of ritual, indeed has become ritual, and is enforced ruthlessly by means of boycott, excommunication and outcasting. But whereas excommunication, in Western terms, merely means exclusion from all religious activities, in Hindu terms it is far more terrible than that, for it means a total boycott by one's kin; nobody will talk to, eat or drink, or sit with, marry, or help in the funeral rites of one who has been excommunicated, for the penalty for breaking the boycott is excommunication. Excommunication even means being thrown out of one's village, with physical violence if necessary. It is so terrifying a penalty in a close-knit society where everyone belongs to his own little group that few dare risk it, and therefore the ritual upon which daily activities are based acquires a sanction so compelling that it, more than anything else, has (as we shall see later) given its particular quality to the whole institution of caste.

Pollution can be anything. At one end of the scale to flay dead animals is polluting because it is an unclean occupation; but at the other end of the scale a high-caste Hindu is polluted (and must therefore undergo ritual purification) if his shadow is crossed by that of an Untouchable. Mr. Thomas, who comes from Kerala, recalls how when the Unapproachables had to work in the village they set up warning signals, much as public works employees do on the roads, sixty paces on either side of themselves.

Some things that are polluting for a particular caste or subcaste are not pol-

luting for another. Eating meat is considered polluting, yet all Kshatryas—and they come next to the Brahmins—eat meat. There are even Brahmins, the Pandits of Kashmir, who not only eat meat but eat it in the company of Muslims; they continue to be Brahmins and remain entitled to look upon all non-Brahmins as inferior. But Brahmins who observe vegetarianism look on Kashmiri Pandits with a disgust reminiscent of what many Britons would feel if a frog was served on their plate. The late Sir Girja Shankar Bajpai, Secretary General for Foreign Affairs, once told me that it was only because he was truly westernised that he could bring himself to eat at the same table as the Prime Minister. 'But you are both Brahmins,' I ventured, 'so what is the difficulty?' 'He is a Kashmiri Pandit. I am a Kanya Khubja, I belong to the highest hierarchy of Brahmins, the ones who are Chaturvedis (of the four *Vedas*), we are strict vegetarians by caste, at least at home; but Nehru is a Kashmiri Pandit, his ancestors were reared on meat and fish . . . I would not wish a girl of my family to marry into his although I have the highest regard for him as Prime Minister.' This may sound reactionary but nevertheless it must be realised that had one of his daughters married a Nehru she would have had to make adjustments in the way the home was run in some ways deeper than those necessary for a Daughter of the Revolution marrying a Southern Negro; not only would she have to watch her husband eat meat, she would also have to overcome the inner repulsion created by the concept of pollution which his eating meat would inevitably induce in her.

Pollution is fundamental but this does not mean that pollution explains every-

thing. It is only one of the factors which govern the ritual life of the orthodox Hindu, a life in which *everything* is governed by ritual, from the occasions on which one eats certain foods, on which one has a bath to those when one cuts one's hair or nails or makes decorative designs on the threshold of one's house, buys new clothes, visits relations . . . the list is as long as life. Therefore caste which begins with pollution develops into a way of life. Perhaps the best illustration, in Western terms, of the way it works would be to compare the behaviour of orthodox Jews in a non-Jewish society to that of a subcaste in relation to the other subcastes around it. If the orthodox Jews lived in an orthodox Jewish State and society many of the little fences they have to erect around themselves to protect their orthodoxy would vanish; they could, for instance, eat and drink anywhere, safe in the knowledge that only permitted foods were available and that none of the dietary taboos would be broken. There would be no problem about observing the Sabbath since everybody would be observing it too; there would be no jobs closed to them, and no danger of intermarriage, so that boys and girls could mix more freely. But the moment these orthodox Jews find themselves in a minority they cannot afford to relax their vigilance for an instant. They can no longer eat everywhere and even when they eat permitted food they have to study the menu carefully in order to make sure that some culinary rule has not been broken unwittingly, for instance by flavouring, shall we say, fillet of sole (which is permitted) with shrimps (which are not). They should, in fact, to be quite safe, refuse to eat out. They cannot take the

first job that comes along because it may involve breaking the Sabbath; I have known of students who did not take exams which were held after sunset on winter Fridays. And of course unless they are prepared to marry out they cannot be careful enough about choosing friends; the same applies in the case of orthodox Hindus.

Every subcaste in India is a minority in the wider society in exactly the same way as are orthodox Jews. Hindus, as a whole, may be in a majority in India but each individual subcaste is in a small minority, so each subcaste has its own ritual rules, and must be endlessly on its guard to see they are not broken.



Again and again this young man bows under the water and gets up again. After a long bath he leaves the river . . . purified.

The Practice of Caste Living

In such a society as America, which allows maximum social mobility, it may be difficult to understand the impact of caste on its individual members. Imagine living in a village, isolated from the rest of the country and world, simply because no efficient means of communication and transportation exists. Imagine a village of two thousand persons whose fathers, grandfathers, and great grandfathers lived and worked in the same community. Imagine that village divided into classes and castes, each accepting its social status and performing interdependent economic activities. In such a village, your very identity as a person originates with your subcaste and caste.

Prior to the 1900's with its modern methods of communication, transportation, and education, an Indian's concept of himself was indistinguishable from his caste. As it would be difficult to distinguish the particle of salt from the water it was dissolved in, so too, would it have been impossible to separate the individual from his caste. The caste member's personality, values, attitudes, hopes, and fears were constructed hundreds of years earlier by his ancestors.

Against this background one can begin to understand the role that caste played in the behavior of the Indian. Through every phase of life, from birth, through childhood, through marriage, the raising of a family, through old age and finally death, caste rules and regulations governed the behavior of the individual. The Indian of a particular caste was simply the living embodiment of caste dharma.

[†]Taya Zinkin, *Caste Today* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

The Practice

How do these intricate rules work out in practice? First of all, let us take an ordinary villager in an ordinary village. For him, so long as he continues to live as his forefathers did, there is no problem. Everything has been laid down for generations; his actions, his thoughts are all cut out for him; all he has to do is follow the rules to maintain the ritual status of his group.

It is necessary to remember that the whole system is based upon a combination of the irrevocability of status fixed by birth, and rebirth. One is born into a particular station from which there is no escape in this life, for it is the consequence of one's deeds in a past existence. If one performs the duties of one's station conscientiously one may be reborn in a better station, or—supreme bliss—not be reborn at all. Under such circumstances vertical mobility such as we find in the West, where the successful coalminer's son goes to Eton, marries a duke's daughter and ends in the House of Lords, is meaningless. The Hindu equivalent would be the good Sweeper who sweeps humbly, does not mind being treated like a pariah and is reborn a Brahmin.

In caste society, there can be no wedding for Prince Charming and Cinderella, for marriage must be within caste. In India Cinderella's parents would have been as horrified by their love as Prince Charming's; Untouchable parents have been known to kill their daughter for disgracing them by running away with a Rajput prince.

So long as everybody thus accepts his position in life as deserved, the system provides the same stability, security and

warmth as there was in Europe when men still thought their station God-given. The subcaste provides a man with a group to which he belongs utterly, and within which all are kin or potential kin. These are the families into which he must marry, these the connexions on whose support he can count in every crisis. Within the village, moreover, the subcastes each have their own rank in a known hierarchy. Since there is nothing people dislike as much as uncertainty, there is a great deal to be said for a system by which everybody knows exactly to whom he should pay respect and exactly from whom to expect it. If it had not afforded this satisfaction the caste system would have disintegrated long ago.



The preparations for an Indian wedding and the ceremony itself have not changed for centuries.

The Untouchables

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is usually referred to as the father of India. He played an active part in helping free India from British control, using a unique method of nonviolent resistance. He taught his fellow countrymen to overcome fear and acquire self-dignity and courage.

Born in 1869, Gandhi's parents belonged to the merchant caste, Vaisya. He studied law in London and later went to South Africa. There he came to understand the nature of the discrimination the Indians endured under British law. He stayed in Africa for twenty-one years defending the civil rights of Indian immigrants. In 1915, he returned to India and became the leader of the Indian nationalist movement. He led many campaigns and established programs to improve the economic freedom of the country. All through World War II he struggled to gain Indian freedom through nonviolent disobedience to British rule. Freedom was finally granted by Britain in 1947.

Gandhi had worked all his life for a united and free India. But the independence of India was accomplished at the expense of the division of his country between India and Pakistan. This deeply saddened Gandhi. Violent riots occurred between Moslems and Hindus as a result of the division. Gandhi started a fast to help bring about an end to the bloodshed. He succeeded and the leaders pledged to stop the fighting. Twelve days later Gandhi was assassinated on his way to a prayer meeting.

In the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi had been for India "a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and take deep breaths, like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes, like a whirlwind that upset many things but most of all the working of people's minds." Gandhi attracted crowds of followers and even won the respect of many of his enemies.

[†] Ronald Duncan, ed., *Selected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Faber & Faber, Ltd. 1951).



Gandhi fasted five days in September, 1932, in an effort to bring about equal and fair representation in the government for all Hindus and Moslems. He is seen here, breaking his fast and editing his first message with the help of one of his granddaughters.

The Devil succeeds only by receiving help from his fellows. He always takes advantage of the weakest spots in our natures in order to gain mastery over us. Even so does the Government retain its control over us through our weaknesses or vices. And if we would render ourselves proof against its machinations, we must remove our weaknesses. It is for that reason that I have called non-cooperation a process of purification. As soon as that process is completed, this Government must fall to pieces for want of the necessary environment, just as mosquitoes cease to haunt a place whose cesspools are filled up and dried.

Has not a just Nemesis¹ overtaken us for the crime of untouchability? Have we not reaped as we have sown? We have

1. The Greek goddess of retributive justice.

segregated the *pariah*² and we are in turn segregated in the British Colonies. We deny him the use of public wells; we throw the leavings of our plates at him. His very shadow pollutes us. Indeed there is no charge that the *pariah* cannot fling in our faces and which we do not fling in the faces of Englishmen.

How is this blot on Hinduism to be removed? 'Do unto others as you would that others should do unto you.' I have often told English officials that, if they are friends and servants of India, they should come down from their pedestal, cease to be patrons, demonstrate by their loving deeds that they are in every respect our friends, and believe us to be equals in the same sense they believe fellow Englishmen to be their equals. I have gone a step further

2. Untouchable.

and asked them to repent and to change their hearts. Even so it is necessary for us Hindus to repent of the wrong we have done, to alter our behaviour towards those whom we have 'suppressed' by a system as devilish as we believe the English system of the government of India to be. We must not throw a few miserable schools at them: we must not adopt the air of superiority towards them. We must treat them as our blood brothers as they are in fact. We must return to them the inheritance of which we have robbed them. And this must not be the act of a few English-knowing reformers merely, but it must be a conscious voluntary effort on the part of the masses. We may not wait till eternity for this much-belated reformation. We must aim at bringing it about within this year of grace.

Untouchability is not a sanction of religion, it is a device of Satan. The Devil has always quoted scriptures. But scriptures cannot transcend Reason and Truth. They are intended to purify Reason and illuminate Truth. I am not going to burn a spotless horse, because the Vedas are reported to have advised, tolerated, or sanctioned the sacrifice. For me the Vedas are divine and unwritten. 'The letter killeth.' It is the spirit that giveth the light. And the spirit of the Vedas is purity, truth, innocence, chastity, simplicity, forgiveness, godliness, and all that makes a man or woman noble and brave. There is neither nobility nor bravery in treating the great and uncomplaining scavengers of the nation as worse than dogs to be despised and spat upon.

How am I to plead with those who regard any contact with the members of the suppressed community as entailing defilement and of which they cannot be cleansed

without necessary ablutions, and who thus regard omission to perform the ablutions a sin? I can only place before them my innermost convictions.

I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism. This idea was not brought home to me by my bitter experiences during the South African struggle. It is not due to the fact that I was once an agnostic. It is equally wrong to think, as some people do, that I have taken my views from my study of Christian religious literature. These views date as far back as the time when I was neither enamoured of, nor was acquainted with, the Bible or the followers of the Bible.

I was hardly yet twelve when this idea had dawned on me. A scavenger named Uka, an untouchable, used to attend our house for cleaning latrines. Often I would ask my mother why it was wrong to touch him, why I was forbidden to touch him. If I accidentally touched Uka, I was asked to perform the ablutions, and though I naturally obeyed, it was not without smilingly protesting that untouchability was not sanctioned by religion, that it was impossible that it should be so. I was a very very dutiful and obedient child and so far as it was consistent with respect for parents, I often had tussles with them on this matter. I told my mother that she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful.

While at school I would often happen to touch the 'untouchables,' and as I never would conceal the fact from my parents, my mother would tell me that the shortest cut to purification after the unholy touch was to cancel the touch by touching any Mussulman³ passing by. And simply out of

3. Moslem.

reverence and regard for my mother I often did so, but never did so believing it to be a religious obligation. After some time we shifted to Porebander, where I made my first acquaintance with Sanskrit. I was not yet put to an English school, and my brother and I were placed in charge of a Brahman, who taught us Ramraksha and Vishnu Punjar.⁴ A motherly old dame used to live close by. Now it happened that I was very timid then, and would conjure up ghosts and goblins whenever the lights went out, and it was dark. The old mother, to disabuse me of fears, suggested that I should mutter the Ramraksha texts whenever I was afraid, and all evil spirits would fly away. This I did and, as I thought, with good effect. I could never believe then that there was any text in the Ramraksha pointing to the contact of the 'untouchables' as a sin. I did not understand its meaning then, or understood it very imperfectly. But I was confident that Ramraksha, which could destroy all fears of ghosts, could not be countenancing any such thing as fear of contact with the 'untouchables.'

The Ramayana⁵ used to be regularly read in our family. A Brahmin called Ladha Maharaj used to read it. He was stricken with leprosy, and he was confident that a regular reading of the Ramayana would cure him of leprosy, and, indeed, he was cured of it. 'How can the Ramayana,' I thought to myself, 'in which one who is regarded nowadays as an untouchable took Rama across the Ganges in his boat, countenance the idea of any human beings being untouchable on the ground that they were polluted souls?' The fact that we addressed God as the

'purifier of the polluted' and by similar appellations, shows that it is a sin to regard anyone born in Hinduism as polluted or untouchable—that it is satanic to do so. I have hence been never tired of repeating that it is a great sin. I do not pretend that this thing had crystallized as a conviction in me at the age of twelve, but I do say that I did then regard untouchability as a sin.

I have always claimed to be a Sanatani⁶ Hindu. It is not that I am quite innocent of the Scriptures. I am not a profound scholar of Sanskrit. I have read the Vedas and the Upanishads⁷ only in translations. Naturally therefore, mine is not a scholarly study of them. My knowledge of them is in no way profound, but I have studied them as I should do as a Hindu and I claim to have grasped their true spirit. By the time I had reached the age of 21, I had studied other religions also.

There was a time when I was wavering between Hinduism and Christianity. When I recovered my balance of mind, I felt that to me salvation was possible only through the Hindu religion and my faith in Hinduism grew deeper and more enlightened.

But even then I believed that untouchability was no part of Hinduism; and that, if it was, such Hinduism was not for me.

I believe that caste has saved Hinduism from disintegration.

But like every other institution, it has suffered from excrescences. I consider the four divisions alone to be fundamental, natural, and essential. The innumerable subcastes are sometimes a convenience, often a hindrance. The sooner there is fusion the better. The silent destruction and reconstruction to subcastes have ever

4. Hindu prayers.

5. Epic Hindu poem.

6. Orthodox.

7. Philosophic discourses illustrated by folktales.

gone on and are bound to continue. Social pressure and public opinion can be trusted to deal with the problem. But I am certainly against any attempt at destroying the fundamental divisions. The caste system is not based on inequality, there is no question of inferiority, and so far as there is any such question arising, as in Madras, Maharashtra, or elsewhere, the tendency should undoubtedly be checked. But there appears to be no valid reason for ending the system because of its abuse. It lends itself easily to reformation. The spirit of democracy, which is fast spreading throughout India and the rest of the world, will, without a shadow of doubt, purge the institution of the idea of predominance and subordination.

The spirit of democracy is not a mechanical thing to be adjusted by abolition of forms. It requires change of the heart. If caste is a bar to the spread of the spirit, the existence of five religions in India—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism—is equally a bar. The spirit of democracy requires the inculcation of the spirit of brotherhood, and I can find no difficulty in considering a Christian or a Mohammedan to be my brother in absolutely the same sense as a blood brother, and Hinduism that is responsible for the doctrine of the caste is also responsible for the inculcation of the essential brotherhood, not merely of man but even of all that lives.

One of my correspondents suggests that we should abolish the caste but adopt the class system of Europe—meaning thereby I suppose that the idea of heredity in caste should be rejected. I am inclined to think that the law of heredity is an eternal law and any attempt to alter that law must

lead, as it has before led, to utter confusion. I can see very great use in considering a Brahmin to be always a Brahmin throughout his life. If he does not behave himself like a Brahmin, he will naturally cease to command the respect that is due to the real Brahmin. It is easy to imagine the innumerable difficulties if one were to set up a court of punishments and rewards, degradation and promotion. If Hindus believe, as they must believe in reincarnation, transmigration, they must know that nature will, without any possibility of mistake, adjust the balance by degrading a Brahmin, if he misbehaves himself, by reincarnating him in a lower division, and translating one who lives the life of a Brahmin in his present incarnation to Brahminhood in his next.

Hinduism

In dealing with the problem of untouchability, I have asserted my claim to being a Sanatani Hindu with greater emphasis than hitherto, and yet there are things which are commonly done in the name of Hinduism, which I disregard. I have no desire to be called a Sanatani Hindu or any other, if I am not such. And I have certainly no desire to steal in a reform or an abuse under cover of a great faith.

It is therefore necessary for me once for all distinctly to give my meaning of Sanatana Hinduism. The word Sanatana is used in its natural sense.

I call myself a Sanatani Hindu, because, (1) I believe in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas and all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures, and therefore in avatars⁸ and rebirth.

8. Incarnations.

- (2) I believe in the Varnashrama dharma in a sense in my opinion strictly Vedic, but not in its present popular and crude sense.
 (3) I believe in the protection of the cow in its much larger sense than the popular.
 (4) I do not disbelieve in idol-worship.

The reader will note that I have purposely refrained from using the word divine origin in reference to the Vedas or any other scriptures. For I do not believe in the exclusive divinity of the Vedas. I believe the Bible, the Koran, and the Zend Avesta to be as much divinely inspired as the Vedas. My belief in the Hindu scriptures does not require me to accept every word and every verse as divinely inspired. Nor do I claim to have any first-hand knowledge of these wonderful books. But I do claim to know and feel the truths of the essential teaching of the scriptures. I decline to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense. I do most emphatically repudiate the claim (if they advance any such) of the present Shankaracharyas and Shastris to give a correct interpretation of the Hindu scriptures. On the contrary, I believe that our present knowledge of these books is in a most chaotic state. I believe implicitly in the Hindu aphorism, that no one truly knows the Shastras who has not attained perfection in Innocence (Ahimsa), Truth (Satya) and Self-Control (Brahmacharya) and who has not renounced all acquisition or possession of wealth.⁹ I believe in the institution of Gurus,⁹ but in this age millions must go without a Guru, because it is a rare thing to find a combination of perfect purity and perfect learning. But one need not despair of ever knowing the

9. A personal religious teacher and spiritual guide.

truth of one's religion, because the fundamentals of Hinduism as of every great religion are unchangeable, and easily understood. Every Hindu believes in God and His Oneness, in rebirth and salvation. But that which distinguishes Hinduism from every other religion is its cow protection, more than its Varnashrama.¹⁰

Varnashrama is, in my opinion, inherent in human nature, and Hinduism has simply reduced it to a science. It does attach to birth. A man cannot change his varna by choice. Not to abide by one's varna is to disregard the law of heredity. The division, however, into innumerable castes is an unwarranted liberty taken with the doctrine. The four divisions are all-sufficing.

I do not believe that interdining or even intermarriage necessarily deprives a man of his status that his birth has given him. The four divisions define a man's calling, they do not restrict or regulate social intercourse. The divisions define duties, they confer no privileges. It is, I hold, against the genius of Hinduism to arrogate to oneself a higher status or assign to another a lower. All are born to serve God's creation, a Brahman with his knowledge, a Kshatriya with his power of protection, a Vaishya with his commercial ability and a Shudra with bodily labour. This, however, does not mean that a Brahman for instance is absolved from bodily labour, or the duty of protecting himself and others. His birth makes a Brahman predominantly a man of knowledge, the fittest by heredity and training to impart it to others. There is nothing, again, to prevent the Shudra from acquiring all the knowledge he wishes. Only, he will best serve with his

10. Religious laws.

body and need not envy others their special qualities for service. But a Brahman who claims superiority by right of knowledge falls and has no knowledge. And so with the others who pride themselves upon their special qualities. Varnashrama is self-restraint and conservation and economy of energy.

Though therefore Varnashrama is not affected by interdining or intermarriage, Hinduism does most emphatically discourage interdining and intermarriage between divisions. Hinduism reached the highest limit of self-restraint. It is undoubtedly a religion of renunciation of the flesh, so that the spirit may be set free. It is no part of a Hindu's duty to dine with his son. And by restricting his choice of a bride to a particular group, he exercises rare self-restraint. Hinduism does not regard a married state as by any means essential for salvation. Marriage is a 'fall' even as birth is a 'fall.' Salvation is freedom from birth and hence death also. Prohibition against intermarriage and interdining is essential for a rapid evolution of the soul. But this self-denial is no test of varna. A Brahman may remain a Brahman, though he may dine with his Shudra brother, if he has not left off his duty of service by knowledge. It follows from what I have said above, that restraint in matters of marriage and dining is not based upon notions of superiority. A Hindu who refuses to dine with another from a sense of superiority misrepresents his Dharma.

Unfortunately to-day, Hinduism seems to consist merely in eating and not eating. Once I horrified a pious Hindu by taking toast at a Mussulman's house. I saw that he was pained to see me pouring milk into a cup handed by a Mussulman

friend, but his anguish knew no bounds when he saw me taking toast at the Mussulman's hands. Hinduism is in danger of losing its substance, if it resolves itself into a matter of elaborate rules as to what and with whom to eat. Abstemiousness from intoxicating drinks and drugs, and from all kinds of foods, especially meat, is undoubtedly a great aid to the evolution of the spirit, but it is by no means an end in itself. Many a man eating meat and with everybody, but living in the fear of God, is nearer his freedom than a man religiously abstaining from meat and many other things, but blaspheming God in every one of his acts.

The central fact of Hinduism however is cow protection. Cow protection to me is one of the most wonderful phenomena in human evolution. It takes the human being beyond his species. The cow to me means the entire sub-human world. Man through the cow is enjoined to realize his identity with all that lives. Why the cow was selected for apotheosis is obvious to me. The cow was in India the best companion. She was the giver of plenty. Not only did she give milk, but she also made agriculture possible. The cow is a poem of pity. One reads pity in the gentle animal. She is the mother to millions of Indian mankind. Protection of the cow means protection of the whole dumb creation of God. The ancient seer, whoever he was, began with the cow. The appeal of the lower order of creation is all the more forcible because it is speechless. Cow protection is the gift of Hinduism to the world. And Hinduism will live so long as there are Hindus to protect the cow.

The way to protect is to die for her. It is a denial of Hinduism and Ahimsa to

kill a human being to protect a cow. Hindus are enjoined to protect the cow, by self-purification, by self-sacrifice. The present-day cow protection has degenerated into a perpetual feud with the Mussulmans, whereas cow protection means conquering the Mussulmans by our love. A Mussulman friend sent me some time ago a book detailing the inhumanities practised by us on the cow and her progeny; how we bleed her to take the last drop of milk from her, how we starve her to emaciation, how we ill-treat the calves, how we deprive them of their portion of milk, how cruelly we treat the oxen, how we castrate them, how we beat them, how we overload them. If they had speech, they would bear witness to our crimes against them which would stagger the world. By every act of cruelty to our cattle, we disown God and Hinduism. I do not know that the condition of the cattle in any other part of the world is so bad as in unhappy India. We may not blame the Englishman for this. We may not plead poverty in our defence. Criminal negligence is the only cause of the miserable condition of our cattle. Our Panjrapoles, though they are an answer to our instinct of mercy, are a clumsy demonstration of its execution. Instead of being model dairy farms and great profitable national institutions, they are merely depots for receiving decrepit cattle.

Hindus will be judged not by their tilaks,¹¹ not by the correct chanting of mantras,¹² not by their pilgrimages, not by their most punctilious observance of caste rules but by their ability to protect the cow. Whilst professing the religion of

cow protection, we have enslaved the cow and her progeny, and have become slaves ourselves.

It will now be understood why I consider myself a Sanatani Hindu. I yield to none in my regard for the cow. I have made the Khilafat¹³ cause my own, because I see that through its preservation full protection can be secured for the cow. I do not ask my Mussulman friends to save the cow in consideration of my service. My prayer ascends daily to God Almighty, that my service of a cause I hold to be just may appear so pleasing to Him, that he may change the hearts of the Mussulmans, and fill them with pity for their Hindu neighbours and make them save the animal the latter hold dear as life itself.

I can no more describe my feeling for Hinduism than for my own wife. She moves me as no other woman in the world can. Not that she has no faults; I daresay, she has many more than I see myself. But the feeling of an indissoluble bond is there. Even so I feel for and about Hinduism with all its faults and limitations.

Nothing elates me so much as the music of the Gita¹⁴ or the Ramayana by Tulasidas,¹⁵ the only two books in Hinduism I may be said to know. When I fancied I was taking my last breath, the Gita was my solace. I know the vice that is going on to-day in all the great Hindu shrines, but I love them in spite of their unspeakable failings. There is an interest which I take in them and which I take in no other. I am a reformer through and through. But my zeal never takes me to the rejection of any of the essential things of Hinduism.

11. Decorative marking on forehead.

12. Religious songs.

13. The Khilafat Movement aimed at protecting civil and religious liberties of Moslem minorities in India.

14. Short for Baghavagita, the basic book of Hinduism.

15. The later edition.

I have said I do not disbelieve in idol worship. An idol does not excite any feeling of veneration to me. But I think that idol worship is part of human nature. We hanker after symbolism. Why should one be more composed in a church than elsewhere? Images are an aid to worship. No Hindu considers an image to be God. I do not consider idol worship a sin.

It is clear from the foregoing that Hinduism is not an exclusive religion. In it there is room for the worship of all the prophets of the world. It is not a missionary religion in the ordinary sense of the term. It has no doubt absorbed many tribes in its fold, but this absorption has been of an evolutionary, imperceptible character. Hinduism tells every one to worship God according to his own faith or dharma, and so it lives at peace with all the religions.

That being my conception of Hinduism, I have never been able to reconcile myself to untouchability. I have always regarded it as an excrescence. It is true that it has been handed down to us from generations, but so are many evil practices even to this day. I should be ashamed to think that dedication of girls to virtual prostitution was a part of Hinduism. Yet it is practised by Hindus in many parts of India. I consider it positive irreligion to sacrifice goats to Kali¹⁶ and do not consider it a part of Hinduism. Hinduism is a growth of ages. The very name, Hinduism, was given to the religion of the people of Hindustan by foreigners. There was no doubt at one time sacrifice of animals offered in the name of religion. But it is not religion, much less is it Hindu religion. And so also, it seems to me that when cow protection became an article of faith with

our ancestors, those who persisted in eating beef were excommunicated. The civil strife must have been fierce. Social boycott was applied not only to the recalcitrants, but their sins were visited upon their children also. The practice which had probably its origin in good intentions hardened into usage, and even verses crept into our sacred books giving the practice a permanence wholly undeserved and still less justified. Whether my theory is correct or not, untouchability is repugnant to reason and to the instinct of mercy, pity or love. A religion that establishes the worship of the cow cannot possibly countenance or warrant a cruel and inhuman boycott of human beings. And I should be content to be torn to pieces rather than disown the suppressed classes. Hindus will certainly never deserve freedom, nor get it if they allow their noble religion to be disgraced by the retention of the taint of untouchability. And as I love Hinduism dearer than life itself, the taint has become for me an intolerable burden. Let us not deny God by denying to a fifth of our race the right of association on an equal footing.

16. A Hindu goddess of creation and destruction.

Caste Regulation in Traditional India

Ideally, a highly regulated society strives to promote conformity in conduct on the part of the individual in order to preserve social stability. And yet, we know that despite the greatest precautions taken, deviations will occur. In India, a youth is more prone to challenge traditional values than his parents. Less concerned with consequences, India's youth today is questioning the validity of traditional sentiments. Unlike many societies, India, because of its caste monopoly on employment and its paucity of large industrial cities, applies enormous pressure for social conformity. Familism, rather than individualism, still prevails.

The following tale indicates clearly the danger faced by the individual when he trespasses the taboos of his subcaste. Not only will such action produce condemnation by the community but rejection by the family as well. Always present in the daily life of a Hindu is the danger of pollution.

Thus, not very long ago, in the village of Mucharin, one Gopal Prasad went to work on a *bund*¹ on the river Lilajana. According to him: "It became late and I decided to spend the night at the *bund* and not return to the village. I am a *Koeri*² by caste. Some other people also were camping there for the night but they were all *Bhoomiyar Brahmins*. Since I had not taken anything with me, they told me to cook and eat in an old earthen pot which was lying in the sand. I was told that that pot had been used

by a *Koeri* before, so I could use it. But it looked very dirty and old, and I thought to myself, how am I to be sure who had used it. Since the *Bhoomiyars* were cooking their meal, I decided to eat the food cooked by them, and did so. They gave me some. Next day there was an uproar in the village. They called me insane and threatened to excommunicate me; they wanted to beat me up. My family also turned against me. Not a soul would take my side. Even if a *Harijan*³ was working the *latha*⁴ on the

1. Bank of a river.

2. Subcaste of Sudras.

3. Untouchable.

4. Irrigation device.

† Kusum Nair, *Blossoms in the Dust* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1961).



As depicted in this early morning scene, life is very hard for the vast majority of Indian villagers.

well I could not bathe there. All this because I had eaten food cooked by a *Bhoomiyar*. I was young then, and it made me angry. So I ran away to Gaya. There I stayed with a tailor and learned the trade. For more than a year I lived in exile. The *purohit*⁵ advised me to have my *shuddhi*⁶ done, but I was obstinate. I decided to fight it out, even if it meant that I could never return to the village. Since I had become independent economically I did not really care.

"Then, fortunately for me, my grandmother died, and the priest advised me to utilize the opportunity to undergo the rites of purification as well. I agreed and went to Vishnupad temple in Gaya and had my head shaved. I had to do that in any case for my grandmother, and then the *purohit* did my *shuddhi* also. Only then was I accepted back in my caste and family."

What is more, according to the villagers, this rule that a low caste should not eat the food of a *Brahmin* (normally it is the other way about) is not in a spirit of retaliation or assertion of equality, but to protect the *Brahmin* and to enforce due respect for him. Because if a low caste eats his food it would not imply contamination, but in cooking for him the *Brahmin's* hands might be burnt and this cause suffering to the *Brahmin*. A *Koeri* is not considered worthy of it. Within the multi-caste village community of Mucharin of today there is normally no intercaste dining nor social intercourse even within the upper castes "unless there is some special occasion when *pukka khana*⁷ is served," this being permitted under the caste rules. But under no circumstances "would we eat with the *Harijans*."

5. Priest.

6. Purification ritual.

7. Certain varieties of cooked food permitted on occasions when members of different castes eat together.

Effect of the Constitution on Traditional India

In 1947, India obtained its independence from Great Britain. The government, under the leadership of Nehru, and other men educated in the West, believed that India should sail a course charted by democratic ideals. They believed that India's enormous problems of illiteracy, poverty, and a very low standard of living could only be resolved by following the currents of industrialization and modernization, courses already traveled by the Western democracies.

To create a democratic society, the government passed laws and promulgated a constitution that called for social equality, equal opportunity for all, and the recognition of the worth of the individual. Making education available to all children, regardless of class status, the government hoped to educate a generation of young people who would assume the task of transforming India from an agrarian, rural society ruled over by tradition to an industrial, urban community motivated by innovation and social progress.

Having chosen this course, the Western-oriented Indian government has met time and again gales of protest from sections of society that either were satisfied with the old ways or were fearful of the unknown future. The anchor of tradition has impeded progress. An enormous gulf exists between law and practice.

The profound gap between law and practice, ideal and reality can be observed. As in other societies, India is discovering that it is exceedingly difficult to get people to discard practices and beliefs that are part of their heritage. However, as the article indicates, while progress is slow, change does occur.

[†]Taya Zinkin, *Caste Today* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

To the British common lawyer everybody is equal in the dock. To the Hindu traditionalist the dock is a place for the most delicate discriminations. Murder, to the common lawyer, is murder; to the traditional Hindu, Brahmin murder and Sudra murder are totally different.

The two attitudes can be simply contrasted by two quotations. The first is Professor Ghurye's description of the old Hindu law:

'If a Sudra recites the *Veda* his tongue is to be cut off. If he assumes a position of equality with twice-born men, either in sitting, conversing, or going along the road, he shall receive corporal punishment. A Sudra committing adultery with women of the first three castes shall suffer capital punishment, or shall be burnt alive tied up with straw . . . if a Sudra intentionally reviles a Brahmin or criminally assaults him, the limb with which he offends shall be cut off.'

The second is Articles 15, 16, 17 of the Indian Constitution.

'The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to—

'(a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment or;

'(b) the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public.

'There shall be equality of opportunity for

all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State.'

The feeling of equality is beginning to percolate into the villages, even into the remoter ones, although it takes different forms in different places. Dr. Bailey tells an interesting story. In Orissa the Boad Outcastes (who are actually engaged in agriculture and gave up unclean professions some time ago) wanted to be admitted to the caste temple of their village. They had been told that temples had been opened to all by law and, believing themselves as good as the rest of the village, insisted on leaving their offerings inside instead of outside the temple. The caste villagers stopped them, and threatened to kill any trespasser. The Boad Outcastes complained to the police, who investigated the matter and left only after peace had been restored and the villagers had been told to open the temple to everybody—knowing full well this would not happen. The Boad Outcastes built themselves a temple similar to the forbidden one, and the school-teacher, a Boad Outcaste, performed the service as if he were a Brahmin. This nobody minded. But the villagers, who resented having had the police called in, decided to teach their rebels a lesson for 'getting above themselves.' A meeting was called and it was decided that the Boad Outcastes would no longer play the music required on ritual occasions and that they would be debarred from receiving alms. Anyone giving anything to a Boad Outcaste would have to pay a fine of 25 rupees¹ (a cow in that area costs less) or be ostracised. Honour had been preserved on both sides.

1. About \$3.25.

Sometimes, however, the tale is not so happy. In the Ramnad District of Madras in 1958 a caste war broke out in which many lost their lives, and thousands their homes. The whole district was plunged into flames and it took the Indian Army to restore order after chaos had reigned for over a week. The crisis came when the local Untouchables decided to assert their right to think for themselves and voted for a candidate of their own choice instead of the candidate of their overlords the Maravas. This was the first time that the Untouchables did not do as they were told and the Maravas, an ex-criminal caste, did not take it well. Incensed, they set fire to whole Untouchable villages. The Untouchables retaliated and found that the Government was on their side. A deathly blow was dealt to Marava prestige, particularly when their leader, Muthuswami Thevar, was gaoled for incitement.

The Untouchables had, as in the case reported by Dr. Bailey, been quick to take advantage of their legal rights. Some of these rights are new, but the fundamental right, the right of equality before the law, goes back a century or more to the beginning of British days. What is really new is the willingness of the lower castes to run risks and to suffer for their rights. It is like what is happening now with Southern Negroes in the United States. The American Constitution has been there all the time; but the feeling among the Negroes that it is worth making every sacrifice to enforce it is new.

Impact of Industrialization on Village Life

This excerpt shows the impact that industrialization has had upon the traditional institutions of Indian life. With industrialization and the rise of towns, individuals are able to escape the rigidity of village caste living. In addition, government attempts to improve the lot of the “Untouchables” have created animosity and confusion among castes who took the labors of the “Harijans” for granted.

Wells and Cowdung Cakes

In the case of Wasan, also, it was only in his village that I could discover the real reason for his reluctance to return home. For one thing, as it turned out, neither he nor his family own an inch of land. One of his brothers works for a landowner for a wage of 22 *maunds*¹ of grain per annum plus his daily meals. The other two do casual labour and get through the year with difficulty. Together with their old mother, their wives and children, they live in stark poverty and filth in one-room mud huts, their clothes black with age, torn and patched, their faces pale and pinched with constant undernourishment.

Theirs is a small village with only 105 houses. If Wasan had to return he would have to face not only the major economic problem of earning a sufficient livelihood

and the minor inconvenience of his wife not having a latrine on the premises. He would also have to revert, professionally and socially, to the position to which he was born in the established social strata within the village, which in his case happens to be the lowliest even among the *Harijans*. Caste stratifications continue to be rigid within a village, and Wasan is a *Balmiki*.² In Bhakra, secure in the anonymity of a vibrator-operator, he could sit on a sofa and have a cup of tea with me in the presence of his executive engineer. In the village, while his wife may have to clean other people's latrines, he would not be permitted even to draw water to drink from any of the wells, except that of his own community.

Thus, in a village near Ambala, the *Jats*³ of the village had to give a separate well to the *Balmikis* because even the local

1. Weight measure equivalent to 82.28 lbs.

2. Balmikis are scavengers.

3. A large peasant group.

†Kusum Nair, *Blossoms in the Dust* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1961).



The Sikhs belong to a religious minority and are chiefly farmers and soldiers.

Ramdasis,⁴ who are also *Harijans* and who had a well of their own, would not permit the *Balmikis* to use it.

In the same village I walked into the house of a grey-bearded Sikh peasant. Though not too impressive or clean, his house is big. In the courtyard two beautiful big bullocks are standing with a bright yellow cloth covering their backs. Cotton is lying on the ground to dry. The man has sufficient land, and according to him everything is fine. He is not a refugee and his fortunes therefore have not suffered any recent upheaval. Just then a woman comes in, wearing a blue *salwar*⁵ and *kameez*.⁶ A warm shawl covers her head and part of the face. Slim, light of skin and with buck teeth and dirty hands she is obviously very angry. Mistaking me perhaps for an emissary of the government, she lets forth a torrent of complaints: not only is

the present administration not doing anything for the *zemindars*,⁷ but it is positively conspiring against them.

"But why are you so angry?" I ask mildly as soon as I can get in a word.

"Why?" she repeats. "The government has given land to *Harijans* in this village. The result is that they will not do our work. And now I, a *Jat* woman" (with heavy emphasis on the word *Jat*) "I have to dirty my hands and do this work of making cowdung cakes. Is this a *Jat's* work?"

"But don't you want the condition of *Harijans* also to improve?" I ask.

"Why should it?" is the forceful reply with the full weight of conviction behind it. "*Harijans* were born to do menial jobs. God made them such, and they should be allowed to continue as such. Am I meant for this—do I deserve it?" and she holds out her dirty hands to invite sympathy.

4. *Ramdasis* are cobblers.

5., 6. Women's dress of baggy trousers and long shirt.

7. Landowners.

Impact of Education on Traditional India

Tradition discourages a member of the high Brahman caste from engaging in agriculture. Religious tradition determines who shall plough the land and who shall not. And yet, in modern times, with education being made available to many Indians of the working castes, many of the farmers' children no longer want to continue in the traditional ways of their parents.

As a school teacher in Birbhum district put it: "Only education makes men of us. But education and cultivation cannot be combined. The two must be kept separate. How can a boy who has been to school do the hard labour which cultivation requires?"

This conviction is universally held, though for varying reasons. There is in some instances the usual inherited caste prejudice which we have come across on several occasions elsewhere, and education has been unable to destroy the dogma underlying it. Thus another village school teacher, Bannerjee, admits, "Yes, of course, I could earn much more if I cultivated the land myself. But since I am a Brahmin, I cannot do it. I will not plough." He has ten acres of land, cultivated entirely by employed labour.

"Why will you not plough—from conviction or simply because you are afraid of society? You are an educated man and you are expected to teach your students the

importance and dignity of manual work. How do you reconcile your education with this outdated and irrational prejudice? Would you plough yourself if you went away to some distant place where nobody knows who you are?," I ask Bannerjee.

Even after thinking it over he persists: "No, I still would not touch the plough. I do not allow my sons to do so either. But then I am only a primary school teacher. There are *Brahmin* teachers in high schools and colleges and they also will not plough, although they are much more educated than me. Yes, I do believe that a *Brahmin* should not plough and that the tradition should be maintained."

Sastiram is another landowning school master. According to him: "We too could get much more income if we worked ourselves. I am not a *Brahmin*; I am a *Kayastha*. But I cannot work because we have a certain status in society to maintain. My father did not work on the land, so I also do not do it. Though with us it is

† Kusum Nair, *Blossoms in the Dust* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1961).



In the mid-1960's, more than a million students attended colleges.

not strictly a religious ban, it would be beneath us to work on the land ourselves.”

Sadgops, like the *Aguris*, to which caste Badan belonged, however, are professionally an agriculturist caste in Bengal. They are excellent cultivators and have no inherited prejudice against handling the plough or doing manual work. But even among them, those who get some education now wholly abandon their inherited way of life. There is Fakir Mandal, an elderly man. He is a *Sadgop*, and his is the biggest and wealthiest family in the village, having the largest holding of land, 200 *bighas*.¹

“I am not a *babu*,”² says Fakir with obvious contempt. “I am a real farmer. My hands will prove it.” He stretches out his rough and gnarled hands proudly. “See my *dhuti*³—the coarse cloth I wear. I have worked myself all my life with my own two hands.” This, despite the large property he owns and the social status he must enjoy by virtue of it.

Yet Fakir’s sons and grandsons are all *babus*, simply because they went to school. Not one of them is working with him in the field. It is beneath them now. Kanai, a young boy of about eight, one of the grandchildren, dressed in shorts and a nylon bush coat, takes off in our presence on a bicycle. Fakir shrugs his shoulders. “What can I do? These are the changes of time. How can I stop it? If the *babu chasas*⁴ go to the field even, they must go on a bicycle. How can they be expected to work? How can they ever become good and efficient farmers? They require fine clothes, sun glasses, watches, bicycles, fountain pens. The whole environment has changed. Even if I have to sell my land I must provide them with these. But they do not work.” And in the case of his family at least there can be no plea that it has no land, or that the holding is too small to meet the new aspirations for a higher standard of life.

1. Measure of surface.

2. Literate person.

3. Male garment.

4. Literate farmers.

Effect of Education on Social Relations

Education has not only liberated the individual from his traditional occupation, but has also caused him to be dissatisfied with his prescribed role. Not only are India's educated youths eager to ignore the caste restrictions governing social relationships, but they are also unwilling to accept the political authority assigned to the elders.

The Young Versus the Old

Another interesting result of the spread of education in rural Bengal is that an acute division appears to have taken place between the generations—the more educated younger people versus their largely less-educated or illiterate elders. At times and places the resultant tensions are extraordinarily bitter, which is a somewhat unusual phenomenon in India where the tradition is for the young to respect age almost unquestioningly.

Since in the rural areas education of more than primary standard is still confined largely to the children of the *bhadra-lok*,¹ this split between young and old exists mainly within the ranks of the same class. When a young man from the *chhoto-lok*² does go to school for a sufficient number of years, not only does he acquire almost invariably the attitudes and values of the *bhadra-lok* but he en-

deavours also to “cross the line” and join the younger group of that class, even if it be only on the periphery. In every village, in fact, the younger educated elements form a separate exclusive group, and there is generally little communication of ideas or values between them and the rest of the population.

At the time of my visit, the first elections to the newly instituted village *panchayats*³ are taking place. Up till now only “Union Boards” have functioned in the rural areas in Bengal, and the franchise was confined to tax-payers. The Boards have been abolished, and now the vote has been extended to all adults, who will elect a village *panchayat*, which will constitute the primary unit for rural development and local self-government.

Although generally the election situation may be described as unpatterned since alignments are neither clear nor uniform, being based mostly on village personalities

1. Upper classes.

2. Lower classes.

3. Village council.

[†] Kusum Nair, *Blossoms in the Dust* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1961).

and factions, the antagonism and rivalry between the young and the old is to an impressive extent in open evidence.

There is an awareness that “these elections would create a conflict between the labour class and the *bhadra-lok*” who employ labour. “Labour is now trying to organize against us, to crush us,” say the elders among the *bhadra-lok*. But, actually, this organization is nowhere in evidence, and the vocal partisans for and against the class of *chhoto-lok* are drawn almost entirely from the ranks of the *bhadra-lok* themselves.

There is Bishen Pal, a candidate—stout, unshaven chin, spectacles. He was educated in Calcutta and is now a village school master. But he says that he represents the poor, and that is his main qualification. Usually, it is the younger elements that claim to be the true champions of the depressed classes.

There is Abul Halim, with a bearded face and dressed in *dhota*⁴ and *kurta*.⁵ He is very young, and you can see the fire in his eyes. A teacher in a high school, he is also a candidate for election. He owns 60 *bighas* of land. But he wants to fight his own class, whom he describes as “the exploiters and reactionary elements of society—the older people and the *ex-zemindars*.”

There is another very young teacher who wanted to join the contest but was found to be under age. His name is Rabindranath and he is a graduate. His complaint—and he is very bitter—is that younger people are unable to get any foothold in society. “Young blood is being ignored and is not respected. That is our complaint. We think the older people are reactionaries. These elections have divided the whole village—father from son and even husband from wife.”

4. Male garment.

5. Indian-style shirt.



About half of the villages in India are run by panchayats, councils of village elders elected by all adults. Professional officials govern the other villages.

Conclusions

1. Discuss some of the positive and negative effects of the caste system in India.
2. Evaluate the notions of superiority and inferiority in a “caste-system” society and in a “class-system” society.
3. Are there countries that do not have any marked social divisions? Can these societies be democracies? Discuss.
4. Can the feudal system of old Europe be compared to the caste system of India in any way? Explain your answer.
5. What made the caste system so strong for so long?

Suggested Readings

Ambedkar, Bhimrao R. *The Untouchables*, New Delhi: Amrit Books, 1948.

Dr. Ambedkar was an "Untouchable." However, he was able to obtain an education and took a major part in the development of the Indian Constitution. This book describes the conditions experienced by the lowly "Harijans" in Indian society.

Hutton, John H. *Caste in India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1961.

This is a comprehensive and highly detailed study of the caste system in India. It covers all phases of caste including the origins, nature, function, and variations in caste structure.

Nair, Kusum. *Blossoms in the Dust*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1961.

Several selections from this work have been used in this unit. This work covers the author's visit to several Indian provinces and her discussions with various groups. The work shows the changes occurring throughout India as a result of modern governmental planning.

Ross, Aileen B. *Hindu Family in its Urban Setting*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961.

This is a modern study of the Hindu family. Dr. Ross offers in this work a sociological analysis of over 100 families. Her study covers household arrangements, kinship structures, life, work, education, and marriage patterns that exist in India today.

Wiser, William and Charlotte. *Behind Mud Walls*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962.

This couple first made a detailed study of an Indian village in 1930. It was one of the first books of its kind by American observers. In 1960, Mrs. Wiser returned to the same village and this work records the changes that have occurred since her initial visit.

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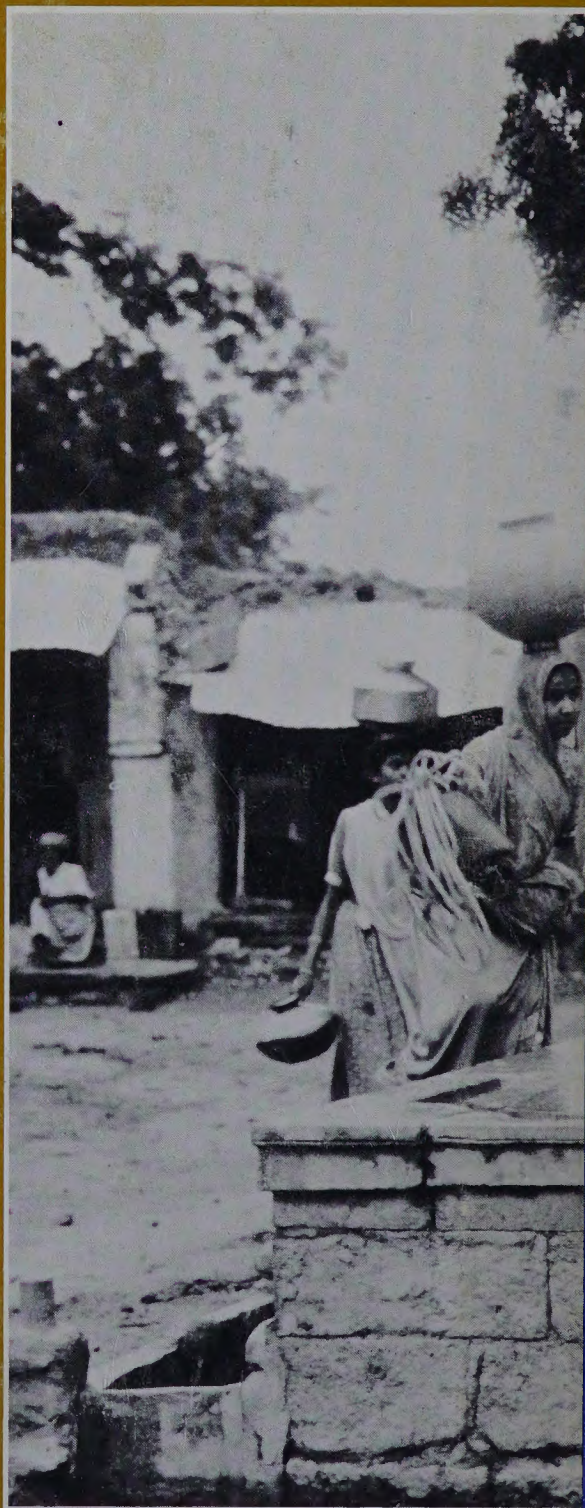
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